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Anderson: Two-fish walleye and bass limits obscure real issue on Mille Lacs

Article by: DENNIS ANDERSON, Star Tribune Updated: March 29, 2013 - 12:13 AM

The two-fish walleye limit this year is supposed to help fishing long-term but doesn't address the real problem.

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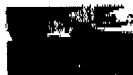
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When the bizarre becomes routine, people accept it as normal. Which might explain the quiet acquiescence among Mille Lacs anglers since the Department of Natural Resources recently announced its two-fish walleye limits for the lake beginning May 11.

Yet the walleye restriction, lowered from four fish last year, with a vastly different harvest slot in force this year than in 2012, isn't even the wackiest regulatory lasso the DNR threw around Mille Lacs.

That prize goes to its new Mille Lacs smallmouth bass limit, which a year ago essentially was zero and now is six.

More on bass below.

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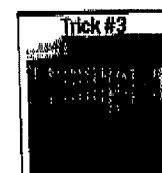
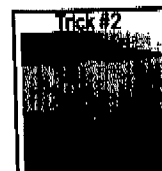
The population of walleye is declining on Lake Mille Lacs, Minnesota's most popular walleye lake, and the DNR, local businesses and anglers find themselves with few options.

Dennis Anderson, Star Tribune

First, consider that in 2012, Mille Lacs walleye anglers could keep four fish under 17 inches (in that bag, one could be longer than 28

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inches), a slot that almost no one could hit, so difficult was it to find fish of that size.

This year, following DNR estimates that walleyes in the lake have skidded to a 40-year low, with disproportionately too few small fish among them, a vastly different harvest scheme is in force. Now the DNR says the only walleyes (in addition to one again that can be longer than 28 inches) anglers can keep must be between 18 and 20 inches, fish that should weigh between 2 and 3 pounds.

Additionally, the Mille Lacs walleye sport-fishing quota has been cut in half this year, to 178,500 pounds — perhaps 100,000 pounds of which (a DNR estimate), or more, will be accounted for in "release mortality," meaning that's the poundage of Mille Lacs walleyes that will die this year after being caught and released.

Remaining in the quota under those circumstances would be only 78,500 pounds of walleyes to be caught and kept by anglers in the coming season. Then the lake, perhaps, would be shut down to walleye fishing.

Unless, of course, the DNR knows something everyone else only suspects: that there are so few 18- to 20-inch walleyes in the lake that the quota never will be reached, no matter how many people fish it.

Meanwhile, the eight bands of Chippewa who net Mille Lacs during the spring spawn (their quota was also halved, to 71,250 pounds) have given no indication they will change the mesh size of their nets, which tend to target walleyes 18 inches and smaller, the same fish sport anglers are trying to protect.

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All of which, no matter whose lens you view it through, is bizarre, in that the bands are using nets during the spring spawn to virtually ensure a highly effective harvest of some of the same fish that, come the sport-fishing opener May 11, everyone else will try to protect.

Why the protection effort?

Because the smaller fish, or many of them, represent the 2008-year class of Mille Lacs walleyes, behind which, for whatever reason, no robust walleye year class follows.

Consider also the lake's new smallmouth regulations.

Last year, anglers could keep one smallie from Mille Lacs, but it had to measure greater than 21 inches, a true hawg pushing the 5-pound range.

This was in keeping with maintenance of what in recent years has become a world-class smallmouth fishery that attracts anglers from throughout the Midwest.

So what does the DNR do?

In an attempt to replace some or all of an unknown number of walleye anglers the agency fears might not visit the lake and spend money, hurting the local economy, because of the tight harvest slot and two-fish limit, officials in a single season kick up the smallmouth limit from one to six (harvested fish this year must be under 17 inches, with one over 20).

Bye-bye world-class smallmouth fishery.

Meanwhile, among DNR Mille Lacs fisheries managers, practiced as they are in both public-resource and public-relations management, the "new normal" is to theorize that so many factors affect the lake and its fishery that it's impossible to decide which among them is foremost.

The lake, after all, now has zebra mussels galore and a sampling of other invasive species, as well as burgeoning smallmouth bass and northern pike populations. Also, thanks to DNR regulations in recent years, the lake might have too many big walleyes that too effectively prey on what appears to be a fragile forage base, including small walleyes.

And on and on.

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All of which are secondary worries.

Fundamentally, what bedevils the lake and its walleyes hides in plain site every spring, and will reveal itself again soon — routine now as ice-out, but nonetheless bizarre.

It's the nets.

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